

A New Afghanistan Nightmare

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When US envoy to Afghanistan, Richard Holbrooke met with Afghanistan's 'democratically' installed President Hamid Karzai in Kabul on February 14, he may have just learned of the historic significance of the following day. February 15 commemorates the end of the bloody Russian campaign against Afghanistan (August 1978-February 1989).

But it is unlikely that Holbrooke will absorb the magnitude of that historic lesson. Both he and the new US President Barack Obama are convinced that the missing component for winning the war in Afghanistan is a greater commitment, as in doubling the troops, increasing military spending, and, by way of winning hearts and minds, investing more in developing the country. That combination, the US administration believes, will eventually sway Afghans from supporting the Taliban, tribal militias, Pashtun nationalists and other groups. The latter is waging a guerilla struggle in various parts of the country, mostly in the south, to oust Karzai's government and foreign occupation forces. While Kabul was considered an "oasis of calm" - by Jonathan Steele's account - during the Soviet rule, it's nowhere close to that depiction under the rule of the US and its NATO allies, who had plenty of time, eight long years, to assert their control, but failed.

In fact, just as Holbrooke sat within Karzai's heavily guarded presidential palace, roadside bombs were detonating across the country, in Khost, in Kandahar and elsewhere. Several police officers were killed, the latest addition to the hundreds of soldiers and officers who die each year as they desperately defend the few symbols of the central government's authority. Aside from its shaky control over Kabul, and a few provincial capitals, the central government struggles to maintain the little relevance it still holds.

This deems most of the country a battleground between Afghani militias, seen by a growing number of Afghans as a legitimate resistance force against an illegitimate occupation; that being US and NATO forces.

Unlike the unpopular war in Iraq, Afghanistan was widely viewed in the US as a moral war, based on the logic that since al-Qaeda was responsible for the September 11 terrorist attacks, and since the group is hosted by an equally militant Taliban government, both groups must pay. So far, the people of Afghanistan have paid many times over the price expected. Thousands were killed, and an entire generation was scarred by a new civil war, and yet a new foreign military occupation.

While mainstream news consumers are inundated with official commentary and occasional news reports on the challenges awaiting the US in Afghanistan, to secure democracy, freedom and 'national interests,' media reports continue to reduce the battle over Afghanistan as one that is concerned with fighting local corruption, instilling human rights

and ensuring gender equality.

Little is said of the pertinent reasons behind the war, as such seemingly tedious rhetoric of great games to control the Eurasian landmass – which dates back to the 19th century’s rivalry between British and Russian empires – is more suited for academic discussions that are by no means newsworthy.

But it is perhaps relevant to note that desperate attempts at controlling Afghanistan have failed miserably in the past. If Holbrooke wishes to dig deeper into history, he should learn that the British Empire, which controlled India at the time, was also defeated in Afghanistan in 1842, and again in 1878. Soviet leaders looked for a quick victory as they occupied Kabul in December 1979, only to find themselves engaged in a most bloody war that cost them 15,000 deaths (it goes without saying that the hundreds of thousands of Afghani deaths often go unreported) and an unmitigated defeat.

But, then again, Holbrooke must’ve known of the details of the latter period, for after all, it was his country that armed and financially sustained the mujahideen forces in Afghanistan fearing that the Soviets’ ultimate objective, during the Cold War was challenging US dominance in the region, and eventually the Middle East. Considering the strategically disastrous toppling of the Shah of Iran to the US, the world-leading superpower could take no chances.

But since then, Afghanistan has grown in significance from a politically strategic landmass, due to its proximity to warm-waters and regional powers, to an energy strategic landmass, inevitable to the exploitation of Caspian oil.

“I cannot think of a time when we have had a region emerge as suddenly to become as strategically significant as the Caspian,” said former vice-president Dick Cheney in a speech to oil moguls in 1998. In the same year, John Maresca, vice president of international relations of Unocal Corporation commented before a House committee in February 2008 on ways to transfer Caspian basin oil (estimated between 110 to 243bn barrels of crude, worth up to \$4 trillion): “(One) option is to build a pipeline south from Central Asia to the Indian Ocean. One obvious route south would cross Iran, but this is foreclosed for American companies because of US sanctions legislation. The only other possible route is across Afghanistan.”

Military success in Afghanistan is simply not possible, for numerous logistical, historical and practical reasons. But failure will also come at a price, at least for those who will directly benefit from subduing the rebellious nation.

Former president Bush and his entourage of allies failed to turn Afghanistan into a US-styled democracy, easily exploitable for strategic and economic use. By pressing a military solution in Afghanistan, Obama is not only summoning another failed US imperial experiment – as that in Iraq – but insists on adding his country’s name to those of Britain and Russia, who had better chances of success, but were squarely defeated

“It’s like fighting sand. No force in the world can get the better of the Afghans,” Oleg Kubanov, a former Russian officer in Afghanistan told Reuters. “It’s their holy land; it doesn’t matter to them if you’re Russian, American. We’re all soldiers to them.”

It would be timely if Holbrooke takes a few hours from his hectic schedule in the region to

brush up on Afghanistan 's history, for he surely needs it.

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